ROUNDTABLE ON DEMOCRACY RESEARCH

MAY 7-8, 2001

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> In recent years, there has been a growing concern that more needs to be done
> to strengthen or build anew democratic communities to fortify the connective
> tissue or to replenish the stock of social capital. Numerous initiatives, dialogues,
> and community-organizing projects have been launched to address the task.
> What are the impediments to the development of more democratic communities?

> A near generation-long trend in public opinion research points to a precipitous
> decline in Americans' confidence in the major institutions of their society
> such as public schools, newspapers, nonprofit organizations, our system of
> justice, even the family itself. What does the loss of confidence in public
> institutions really signal?

> Americans are concerned about their role in the political system. People
> believe that money rules. The number of Americans who vote remains low
> (and is declining even farther among youth). People have no confidence that
> they can make a difference in the system. Is the legitimacy of our political
> system at issue?

ROUNDTABLE ON DEMOCRACY RESEARCH
A Report by Scott London

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade or two, democracy has broken out in some of the most unlikely places, from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to South Africa and Latin America. Today, all but a handful of countries claim to embrace democratic ideals. It seems strange that as "the Jeffersonian religion triumphs around the globe," as a memorable headline in the *Wall Street Journal* puts it, many established democracies in the West are succumbing to civic alienation and mistrust. Faith in politicians is waning, confidence in public institutions is on the decline, and voter turnout is at or near all-time lows. In the United States in particular, a series of worrisome trends, from declining confidence in government to a deepening anxiety about our social and moral values, paint a bleak picture of our democratic prospects at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Indeed, America is in the midst of a "civic crisis," according to a recent report by the Saguaro Seminar. Summarizing three years of dialogue among a diverse group of democratic thinkers and practitioners, the report states that we are more disconnected from each other and from the institutions of public life than we have ever been. Once a nation of joiners, we have become a nation out of joint. Reweaving the strands of America's social fabric may be the most pressing challenge we face in coming years, the report concludes. "Without strong habits of social and political participation, the world's longest and most successful experiment in democracy is at risk of losing the very norms, networks, and institutions of civic life that have made us the most emulated and respected nation in history. The reversal of this downward spiral is critical to the civic and social health of our nation."

A loosely formed civic renewal movement has emerged in recent years in response to these problems, drawing a powerful and ideologically diverse group of civic and political leaders. Much of the work is aimed at supporting local initiatives, looking for common ground among divergent philosophical camps, and encouraging a heightened sense of civility and civic participation in a search for solutions. But numerous questions remain. What do we mean when we use words such as civic renewal, community-building," "public trust," and "civic engagement." Are we talking about the same things? What is happening, and who is doing what? What are the deep and enduring problems that still need to be addressed?

In early May 2001, the Kettering Foundation convened a small gathering of distinguished thinkers and practitioners to explore these questions with foundation trustees and to spotlight promising and innovative approaches to civic engagement. Held at the St. Regis Hotel in Washington, D.C., the Roundtable on Democracy Research brought together two dozen scholars, civic leaders, elected officials, foundation executives, and journalists – including some of the most respected names in the field – "to see if we can produce a good assessment of where we stand today and explore fruitful avenues for further research and reflection," as Kettering Foundation President David Mathews said in his welcoming remarks.

The agenda was organized around three fundamental questions: 1) What are the impediments to the development of more democratic communities? 2) What does the loss of confidence in public institutions really signal? 3) Is the legitimacy of our political system in question? These questions each touch on a core aspect of our current civic crisis – the breakdown of the American community, the crisis of confidence in institutions, and the widespread anger and disaffection many Americans harbor toward the political system. They also deal with the problem at three levels: at the community or grassroots level, at the civil society level where the public and the private spheres intersect, and at the government or public policy level. While the public has a crucial role to play at each of these levels, many citizens have "opted out" of the process in anger, frustration, and a sense of futility.

SESSION 1.
BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY

In what proved to be a lively opening session, the group took up the question of community and its role in making democracy work. Anna Faith Jones, president and CEO of the Boston Foundation, opened with a survey of key works that have contributed to our understanding of community in recent years, from Robert Bellah and his colleagues' landmark study, *Habits of the Heart,* to the pioneering work of John Gardner and the National Civic League to, most recently, Robert Putnam's analysis of the decline of social capital in the United States. "What is the state of the art now, after almost 15 years of looking at this question?" Jones asked. "Who is doing what? What seems to be

working? What isn't working? What still needs attention?"

Addressing these questions naturally presumes a shared understanding of the word "community." But what exactly is community? Is it a geographical concept? Is it synonymous with "place"? According to William Galston, director of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland, "community" denotes something greater than a neighborhood but something smaller than a region in the view of most Americans. While it is increasingly identified with other forms of association, such as professional organizations and on-line networks, "local place remains the touchstone of community."
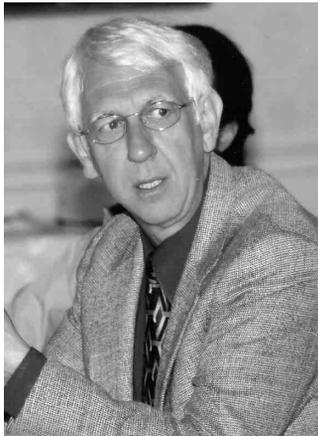
What I think people are yearning for is an effective, lifelong sense of connectedness in which people make meaningful lives together.

– Daniel Kemmis

"That doesn't suggest we ought to end our analysis with local place," Galston added. "But it does suggest that that's not a bad place to begin, because then you can begin to define the tensions that have grown up between local place, on the one hand, and various other forms of community on the other, forms that tend to draw people away from the local places that they continue to value. So, my research-based recommendation is to take the idea of local place as a primary topic in the work out there."

Representative James Leach of Iowa took issue with that approach. While local place may be a good beginning, he asserted, "it's a decreasingly relevant beginning because local places are disappearing in terms of how people think of themselves." Increasingly, people identify themselves based on common interests, activities, and associations. According to Leach, the place-based approach to community has two problems: First, "no one in the world ever uses the term 'place' – they use 'neighborhood'"; and second, place is "decreasingly relevant to the way Americans live."

Even so, you cannot deny that community still exists and is still real for people, responded Daniel Kemmis, director of the Center for the Rocky Mountain West at the University of Montana at Missoula. "It is still at work across the landscape." In practical terms, what people

mean by community is a sense of connectedness. There is a longing for the connectedness that shared interests and activities alone cannot satisfy. "What I think people are yearning for is an effective, lifelong sense of connectedness in which people make meaningful lives together. And where people make meaningful lives together is in places."

Kemmis went on to say that the concept of place is not without problems. "We're governing ourselves within structures that are not very responsive, even geographically. We've drawn jurisdictional boundaries around places that are not places in any true sense. Then we ask people to govern themselves within them." That simply does not work in practice, he said. People feel trapped, ineffective, and alienated within these sorts of governance structures. Therefore, addressing the question of community requires that we deal with the issue of place both literally and figuratively.

Regardless of how one defines community, William Galston interpolated, the signs of distress we see today – "the signal flares that have been going up across the political landscape" – reflect the discrepancy most Americans feel between what they want and what they have. "Many people are choosing to leave place," he said. "But this is not a choice without loss. I think it is the sense of loss attendant to those choices that people are now wrestling with."

The discrepancy between what people have and what they yearn for is a useful distinction in understanding the question of community, said Daniel Yankelovich, trustee emeritus of the Kettering Foundation. Whether or not communities of place are decreasingly relevant to our lives – as Congressman Leach maintained – "it's very difficult to have real community without the kind of interaction that comes from reaching out to one another and engaging each other in dialogue."

According to Gail Leftwich, president of the Federation of State Humanities Councils, a community is tied not only to a common place but to a common set of values. The theme was echoed by attorney Lisle Carter, Jr. A community is anchored in "cultural

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attachments that develop over a long period of time," he said. When these bonds are severed, they cannot be quickly or easily replaced. For those of us who are immersed in community-building, it is worth bearing in mind that the process is like "planting redwoods" – the fruits of our efforts belong to future generations, not our own.

While cultural attachments and common bonds are important, they are not enough to sustain community, observed Margaret Simms, vice president of research at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Reflecting on her work in three ethnically diverse communities in Los Angeles County, she said that shared cultural bonds and even common values are not enough to bring people together without common institutions. "You don't get cooperation by coming together around Cinco de Mayo or Martin Luther King Day," she said. "It only works through institutions, whether they are newly formed or already in place."

Chris Gates, president of the National Civic League, noted that the community of the twenty-first century is not what it was in the 1950s or 1960s. "Many of the people who have put theories on the table about what community looks like have been referring to a white-picket-fence, 1950s-version of community," he said. But we are in a new era now. "As we look at the census data coming out about what our communities look like in this country, it's clear that the issue of racial and ethnic diversity has moved from being something that 'those people' in 'those communities' deal with to something that all of us have to deal with."

The point generated a flurry of responses. David Mathews suggested that the diversity argument, taken on its own, does not hold up to scrutiny. Communities a century ago were highly diverse, just as they are today. Still, as Gail Leftwich pointed out, there is little denying that America has a greater consciousness of its own diversity. "We've lost that assumed worldview that everybody used to share," she said. In that sense, an awareness of our diversity has undermined our sense of common identity.

But the problem cuts both ways since communities cannot be truly democratic unless they are diverse. James Fishkin, political scientist at the University of Texas at Austin, argued that "one of the big problems with American democracy is that we have inattentive, disengaged citizens who, when they talk about politics and public affairs, talk to

people like themselves. Communities, in that sense, are not fully diverse. The really engaged citizen has a variety of diverse points of view and talks to people with very different perspectives before making up his or her mind."

William Galston underscored that this need for diversity is yet one more rationale for speaking of community in geographical terms. "One of the normative advantages of focusing on place is that places are far more likely to be sources of adversity than are voluntary associations. There is a lot of research suggesting that voluntary associations in the past two generations have become increasingly homogenous. So affinity groups are not going to be arenas for discussions across differences. They are going to be arenas for the reinforcement and intensification of sameness."

Community is not possible in any real sense unless it incorporates the tension of opposing values and worldviews. Being in community, involves overcoming the comfort of being on your own or with others who are just like you.

– Gail Leftwich

On the surface, the discussion up to this point appeared to be mired in a search for appropriate definitions of the word "community." But there was some method to it, as Chris Gates pointed out. Developing a common understanding of the word is essential, he said, because it turns out that many people have false assumptions about what community means. "When we throw around the word 'community,' we presume that it's a neutral good – that we all know what community is and that it's a good thing. My sense is that, in fact, we are not in agreement about what we are trying to build and develop. There is no shared definition of what a 'good community' is." One of the most striking examples of this, he said, is the work of the New Urbanists – a group of well-meaning community planners who have attempted to build good communities from scratch, often based on a deeply nostalgic notion of what that means. "They have created communities at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars that are beautiful places to live and have great schools. The only thing missing in these physical places is a sense of community. The irony is huge."

How community is defined seems to depend on how one plans to put that knowledge to work, observed Scott Fosler, visiting professor at the

University of Maryland. How it is defined is a pragmatic question, one that cannot be asked without an eye to what ought to be done. Searching for definitions may give us a better sense of what community means, he said, "but are we ever going to get other people to accept those definitions and use the word in that precise way?"

Moreover, in attempting to put our finger on "community," we treat it as something that exists "out there." According to Cole Campbell, former editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and a fellow at the Poynter Institute, we would be better off understanding community as a verb than a noun. "The question to pose should not be 'How do we define community?' but rather, 'How do we define acting together in a community?'" Rephrasing the question is important because "there is a difference between 'being in a community' and 'being in community.'"

What does community-building mean in practical terms? If it is true, as Cole Campbell suggested, that community is better understood as a verb than a noun, then how do we make communities happen? The group put forth a number of answers to the question. According to Daniel Kemmis, developing a sense of connectedness and belonging can only happen through "authentic engagement." People have to feel that they are "making a world together," as he put it. Community is the result of public-making – of people banding together and recognizing among themselves a common set of values and interests.

Can we build a strong community without building a strong democratic community? The question is: To what extent are community and democracy linked?

– Suzanne Morse

From that vantage point, community is something that emerges as a by-product of something else. "The development of a sense of community is a secondary effect," said Edwin Dorn, dean of the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. "People gather first around a specific concern or set of interests, and in the process of discussing those interests they develop an emotional attachment to one another that extends beyond the resolution of that specific problem."

Community involves creating civic spaces that "bring people from different communities into one community," observed Chris Gates. For those in the National Civic League, he said, the hardest task is always "to get people out of their comfort zone and to convince them that it's not enough to simply be active in your neighborhood association or parent/teacher association. For true community to exist, it has to move beyond that to a higher level."

Several participants underscored the importance of diversity and alternative points of view in forging an authentic community. For example, Gail Leftwich argued that community is not possible in any real sense unless it incorporates the tension of opposing values and worldviews. Being in community, she said, involves "overcoming the comfort of being on your own or with others who are just like you." Building community therefore means creating mechanisms that allow people to find common ground – to bridge their differences – and make common cause. "You have to create ways for people to find out that they are not, in fact, as different from one another as they thought."

David Mathews made a distinction between private communities and public communities. Private communities exist primarily to serve the individual needs of their members. As such, they usually confer a sense of connectedness, belonging, and identity, among other things. By contrast, public communities exist to serve collective needs. Their chief purpose is a political one, namely to maximize the autonomy and self-determination of a group of people. According to Mathews, this distinction is significant because public community is something that happens organically among people who attempt to govern themselves. It is a natural democratic impulse.

Attempts to foster public community by appealing to people's private needs will never work, Mathews said. In a vivid example of this misguided approach, the United Nations sought to bolster civic engagement in a poor and divided region of Central America by paying townspeople to attend public meetings. In the short run, it increased civic participation; but in the longer run it had the effect of weakening an already fragile social fabric. As Mathews put it, "there are no more public meetings because the people of this impoverished country learned that [public meetings] are a source of income, and they are not about to show up at a meeting without getting paid."

Expanding on Mathews' observations, Congressman James Leach urged

the group to make a clearer distinction between community and political community. "It is absolutely correct to talk about political community and to work to revitalize and strengthen that," he said. "But one shouldn't confuse that with community. That's a totally separate subject."

On the whole, the point was well taken. As the discussion drew to a close, Suzanne Morse, executive director of the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, summed up the central challenge of all community-building efforts: "Can we build a strong community without building a strong democratic community?" Put another way, the question is: to what extent are community and democracy linked? Is it possible to have a strong community without a strong democratic foundation? And conversely, can democracy be realized without strong communities at the local level? For those endeavoring to revitalize American civic life, these are some of the deep and enduring questions.

We are certainly expecting more of our institutions. But, at the same time, we are more pessimistic because we don't think institutions are effective in many cases.

– Mary Hatwood Futrell

SESSION 2.
THE CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Public trust in institutions has dropped precipitously in recent years. People no longer trust the medical profession, support their public schools, or believe that the press serves the public good. Confidence in the legal profession has dropped and America's system of higher education is regarded by many with increasing suspicion and dismay. These trends are alarming because institutions play a crucial role in a democratic society, one that goes beyond merely providing particular services. At their best, institutions help to "build the civic order," as David Mathews put it. They are the vehicles through which people come together to do their common work.

What do we make of the current mood in America? Have we become more pessimistic as a society or are we demanding more of our institutions? As the Roundtable's second session got under way, participants

seemed unclear about the exact causes. We are certainly expecting more of our institutions, observed Mary Futrell, dean of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at George Washington University. "But, at the same time, we are more pessimistic because we don't think institutions are effective in many cases." Margaret Simms echoed the point, adding that people no longer recognize themselves in the institutions that purport to act on their behalf.

Based on his public opinion research, Daniel Yankelovich pointed out that the notion of a steady decline of confidence in institutions is inaccurate. It is not so much a long-term trend, he said, as a symptom of the larger problem of institutional lag. "We're up against an enormous amount of social change, and institutions find it difficult to respond to those changes fast enough for the public. Institutions are not able to change as quickly as individuals do."

What is really at issue is a perception on the part of the public that institutions are no longer responsive to the people they claim to represent.

— **Scott Fosler**

Several participants picked up on that, wondering if the crisis of confidence in institutions has been somewhat exaggerated. Perhaps it reflects nothing more than the emergence of new kinds of institutions that are not as well established as other more traditional institutions. Daniel Kemmis pointed to the growth of the Internet, charter schools, public radio, the land trust movement, watershed councils, and local collaboratives as examples of "emergent" institutions that are held in high esteem by the public. Drawing on complexity theory, Kemmis suggested that "if you see decay on one side, you might want to watch for signs of strength and emergence on the other."

Since these institutions are new, they can be difficult to spot and categorize, observed E.J. Dionne, Brookings Institution senior fellow and columnist for the *Washington Post.* But they are important to identify, he said, because they reflect a creative response to new circumstances, on the one hand, and the failure of traditional institutions to address enduring problems on the other.

For a number of participants, the problem was one of poor performance on the part of institutions. One aspect of this, they said, is that institutions have become increasingly process-driven rather than per-

formance-driven. "People are frustrated because what they really want is results, said Jack MacAllister, chairman of the board emeritus of US West, "Public institutions are perhaps weakest on identifying and projecting the actual results of their efforts. If we could encourage public institutions to focus on the end result of their work – what they are really proud of – that would diffuse some of the public frustration."

This view met with some resistance, however. As several participants pointed out, the notion of performance is at best vague, at worst misleading. Cole Campbell called it "inside-the-box" thinking. Scott Fosler agreed, saying that the idea of performance as something that can be measured according to some objective criteria does not apply to most public institutions. What is really at issue is a perception on the part of the public that institutions are no longer responsive to the people they claim to represent.

According to Daniel Yankelovich, the distinction between process and performance is a false one to begin with. The reason we tend to think in terms of this dichotomy is that institutions lack effective feedback mechanisms. What institutions must do, he said, is find some way to be accountable and responsive to the people they serve, and that process must include the public. That is the "big change" institutions need to make.

"People are incredibly eager to be included," Chris Gates pointed out. "When institutions are capable of doing that, people get hopeful and engaged almost immediately." There are now many examples of that around the country, he said, from public schools getting parents more involved and newspapers turning to their readers for help in making difficult editorial decisions, to nonprofit organizations engaging their local communities before establishing new funding guidelines. "We need to disseminate these success stories," Gates said, "and encourage people to replicate them."

Just as political elites subscribe to a dysfunctional model of public engagement – as Daniel Yankelovich noted in his opening remarks – many institutions also adhere to flawed assumptions about their relationship to the public. All too often, they see themselves not as allies working with the public, but as trustees working on behalf of the public. This is reflected in a pervasive guardianship ethos in the institutional world. School policies are shaped without parental or community input. Newspapers decide for their readers what is fit to

print. Prescriptions and medical treatments are dictated by HMO guidelines instead of the recommendations of doctors. It is not surprising that the public is jaded.

A noteworthy exception to the general trend appears to be the jury system, according to John Doble, president of Doble Research Associates, Inc. According to his focus group research, institutions are credible to the extent that they fully represent the public – and citizen juries, by definition, are civic bodies. "What we notice again and again," Doble said, is that "if the jury reaches a verdict that people don't like, they say, What's wrong with that jury?' But no one says, 'Let's get rid of the jury system." This example is telling, he says, because the public favors institutions that give it a legitimate voice and a function.

In his influential 1989 book, *Democracy and Its Critics,* Robert Dahl outlined two alternatives to democracy – guardianship and anarchy. The most eloquent proponent of guardianship was Plato, who espoused the notion of the philosopher-king – the benevolent ruler who was more wise or competent or knowledgeable than others and was therefore in a position to make the best decisions. Anarchists, on the other hand, believe that society is inherently coercive and that the only legitimate institutions are those that are voluntary. Both of these views are reflected in the current disconnect between institutions and the public, according to Cole Campbell. While institutions have been moving toward a guardianship model of democracy, he said, the individual has been moving toward an anarchic model. The only institutions they trust are those in which they have some personal investment or stake.

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– Cole Campbell

In Campbell's view, this change tokens a loss of public authority on the part of institutions. "It's important for citizens to feel a sense of agency, control, impact, and influence over what's happening in public life," he said. "Often, they delegate authority to institutions as a way of realizing their sense of agency. They authorize the newspaper to go out and paint a picture of the world on their behalf because they don't have time to do it. They say, in effect, 'We can't be everywhere ourselves, so

we're now making you our agent, we're giving you the authority, to perform credibly.' What happens is that when institutions fail to perform effectively, those who have 'authorized' them begin to withdraw that authority." Today, "we have all kinds of professions and institutions that are no longer seen as the agents of the people. Too often, the elites in these institutions say, 'What's wrong with the people?' Or 'How can we salve their wounds?'" What they should be asking instead is, "How can we fundamentally rethink the basis of our relationship with them?"

The fact that citizens no longer trust public institutions reflects an overall shift "from faith in collective action to faith in individual action," as E.J. Dionne put it. In the past, Americans trusted the discretion of institutions. But as we have become increasingly wary of authority in all its forms, we have also come to mistrust discretion. We no longer want institutions to have too much discretion, because it can be used against us. As a result, we have tried to rein in institutions through increasingly elaborate rules and regulations, along with a legal and regulatory structure to back them up.

William Galston summed up our current predicament: "In protecting ourselves against discretionary authority, we have also protected ourselves against the capacity of others to take effective action on our behalf. In our effort to protect ourselves against the worst that institutions can do to us, we have also protected ourselves against the best that institutions can do for us. Now we don't know what to do." What is needed, he suggested, is a new understanding of "legitimate institutional authority." Institutions will never enjoy the sort of authority they had in the past, he said, because we cannot turn back the clock. The question we must ask ourselves now is, "How can we have a forward-looking – not a nostalgic or backward-looking – rebuilding of confidence in institutions consistent with our new elevated suspicions directed toward authority of all kinds?"

SESSION 3.
THE QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY

Americans have always harbored a healthy skepticism toward government. But over the last few decades, that skepticism – usually regarded as the mark of mature citizenship – has given way to anomie and mistrust. According to one study, fewer than four in ten Americans say they can count on the nation's political leaders to do the right thing. That figure is down sharply from the mid-1960s. "Habitual liars are not to be trusted," reports *USA Today,* "and that is the charge many make against government today."

People's complaints take many forms. They feel that money rules in Washington, that special interests control the political agenda, that tax and spending is out of control, and that regulations and red tape have rendered the system inefficient and unfair. Increasingly, they feel that their voice no longer counts. As Richard Morin writes in the *Washington Post:* "An overwhelming majority of Americans say the public should have a voice in setting public policy – but few people think that it does."

In the wake of the 2000 presidential elections, many Americans have even begun to doubt the electoral system – the cornerstone of the democratic process. The Florida ballot counts raised a host of troublesome questions about our political system. If it is so democratic, many rightly wondered, why was the election stalemate resolved behind the closed doors of the Supreme Court? In a full-page ad in the *New York Times,* 554 law professors accused the high court of "acting as political proponents" for George W. Bush and for "taking power from the voters." Worse, the ad scolded, the government's handling of the situation "tarnished its own legitimacy."

This question of legitimacy – of whether the government acts with the full consent of the governed – served as the focus of the third and final session of the Roundtable. Participants cited a wide range of concerns about the nation's political system, from declining voter turnout

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– Margaret Simms

to bureaucracy and gridlock, from the power of money to what Kettering Foundation trustee Jim Thomas called "the explosion of single-interest lobbying groups." E.J. Dionne noted that the rich increasingly "buy their way out of public problems." If you are wealthy enough, he said, there will always be problems that are better solved individually than collectively. Margaret Simms spoke of the feeling, especially pervasive among minorities, that the system is not truly representative: "Certain racial and ethnic groups, for example, do not feel that their vote can actually result in having someone in office who represents their views."

Another challenge to legitimacy is posed by new mechanisms that claim to make the democratic process more democratic. These include ballot initiatives, various forms of electronic voting, and the rise of what some refer to as "net activism," or on-line lobbying. The trouble is that these mechanisms are often used to serve undemocratic ends. Cole Campbell pointed to California Propositions 184, 187, and 209, for example, which used supposedly democratic means to roll back democratic advances.

While these problems were discussed at some length, participants seemed to agree that the legitimacy question revolved around a deeper and more complex problem – the disconnect between citizens and government. Peter Levine, research scholar at the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland, put the issue into perspective. A legitimacy crisis is different from a crisis of confidence, he said. Public confidence is usually measured in proportion to the effectiveness and responsiveness of government. But in a legitimacy crisis, "the complaint is about the process and not about the outcomes." For example, the public feels that government is increasingly beholden to special interests rather than the common good. That is a complaint about process, not outcomes.

Chris Gates underscored the point, saying that a crisis of legitimacy is not about specific issues. It is not about agreement or disagreement with the nuts and bolts of policy-making. Rather, it is about whether citizens feel that their voice is represented. According to Gates, the trend toward direct democracy is a clear indication that the public feels excluded. Because they feel shut out of the political process, they are resorting to mechanisms that bypass the elected representatives and the machinery of government.

According to Daniel Kemmis, this trend suggests that "we have a form of government that no longer fits who we are. The representative form is not capturing the democratic impulse." The question we need to ask, he said, is whether people have mechanisms that allow them to be engaged in an authentic and meaningful way. Are there institutions in place that give people opportunities to participate, deliberate, and make common cause?

A crisis of legitimacy is not about specific issues. It is not about agreement or disagreement with the nuts and bolts of policy-making. Rather, it is about whether citizens feel that their voice is represented.

– Christopher Gates

The eighteenth-century notion that it is up to representatives to "refine and enlarge the public's views" does not reflect the realities of twenty-first century politics, observed James Fishkin, chair of the department of government at the University of Texas at Austin. What is needed today, he said, are mechanisms and institutions that allow the public to be an integral part of the political process. "If you have the people seriously engaged in thinking actively, then they take ownership of the process. Right now, the only form of ownership they perceive is the ownership you get from making campaign contributions or contributions to interest groups. The psychological ownership that comes from dialogue and participation, from being consulted in decision making, is more effective."

When people are engaged in this way, John Doble noted, the process is deemed legitimate by the public, no matter what the final outcomes may be. "The public trusts the public," he said. "When a diverse group of people get together and spend a fair amount of time deliberating about a complex issue, people trust the outcomes."

As Albert Hirschman pointed out in his oft-cited 1970 work, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty,* people have two options in addressing the sort of disaffection we see today: "exit" or "loyalty." They either break their ties and avoid unpleasant obligations, or they stay the course and remain committed. The key to determining what people choose, Hirschman argued, has to do with the extent to which they have a "voice." As several participants noted, the decline of civic engagement reflects this loss of voice. Reversing current trends requires mechanisms that give people opportunities to participate, deliberate, and make choices together.

"People don't need to make the decisions," Daniel Yankelovich asserted, "but they have to have a voice." He described his choice work dialogues as one example of this kind of process, one that by its very nature promotes legitimacy. "What people are asking for," he said, "is responsiveness on the part of our political leadership." The role of government must be reformulated from "a Madisonian conception in which only the elites deliberate, to a conception where elites and the public find a mechanism for deliberating together." If you can find that, he added, "then you will be including the public – not in the raw opinion sense, but in the sense of having really engaged these issues. If we can do that, I think we will have addressed and solved the problem of legitimacy."

Sadie Flucas, associate dean of Community Education and Development at The College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, observed that this approach has benefits that go far beyond public confidence and loyalty to the process. It can also be a very useful tool for officeholders. "My colleagues at Gulf Coast Community College down in Florida tell us that they started some years ago having public forums on issues that were coming up before the state legislature, and now many of their state legislatures will not go into that chamber to cast a vote until they have held these public forums, because they have come to value the voice of the people."

What is needed today, are mechanisms and institutions that allow the public to be an integral part of the political process.

– James Fishkin

"What we need to think about is creating institutional mechanisms to facilitate this kind of public dialogue," James Fishkin argued. "It is the key to creating greater engagement, to creating a public voice that is worth listening to, to creating the sort of habits of citizenship that people take with them." He added that "one of the things that the Kettering Foundation has done over the years is to provide some of the infrastructure, in terms of moderator skills and briefing booklets, that give citizens a chance to actually discuss the issues without some secret agenda."

The question, then, is whether such mechanisms and processes of

engagement can be writ large – whether they can be brought to full political scale. Some participants favored having civic leaders play a more active role in the political process by serving as a bridge between communities and the political system as a whole. Others felt that such an approach might be perceived as replacing one form of representation with another. As Scott Fosler wondered, "What makes us think that the public is going to be sufficiently happy with this enlightened civic leadership, or that they will be satisfied that their views are being represented?" A better approach, he said, may be to simply "build on what grows" – to lend support and credibility to those efforts already under way that strengthen civic engagement and restore legitimacy.

My colleagues in Florida started some years ago having public forums on issues that were coming up before the state legislature, and now many of their state legislatures will not go into that chamber to cast a vote until they have held these public forums.

– Sadie Flucas

SUMMARY

The Roundtable on Democracy Research examined three of the most pressing challenges facing American democracy – the breakdown of the traditional community, the decline of public confidence in institutions, and the widening rift between citizens and government. These trends can be attributed in large part to several "problems behind the problems," according to the participants. First, it appears that civic engagement and anomie are rooted in a loss of agency on the part of the public; citizens feel dislodged from their rightful place in the democratic process. Second, many public institutions subscribe to a guardian mentality that alienates their constituencies; more often than not, institutions act *on behalf of* the public, rather than *with* the public. Third, the rise of individualism has brought with it a diminished faith in collective action, on the one hand, and a reluctance to delegate authority to others – particularly institutions – on the other.

While the discussion of remedies ranged widely, the participants observed that the most promising civic renewal efforts are those that

share a number of common features: They nurture and support community where it already exists (rather than create faux community or what one participant called "Astroturf" community); they provide mechanisms for deliberation and other forms of "public-making"; and they engage the public directly in the process of making choices, negotiating tradeoffs, and setting policy agendas.

As one might expect, the discussion raised many more questions than it answered. What remained at the end of the day were some deep and probing questions about the relationship between community and democracy, about institutional responsiveness and accountability, and about citizen participation in the process of political decision making. The community-building session raised some thorny questions about the distinction between community and political community. How closely are they linked? Is it possible to have a strong community without a strong democratic foundation? And conversely, to what extent is democracy realizable without strong communities at the local level? The second session took up the strained relationship between democratic institutions and the public. To what extent is public mistrust a function of poor performance? By what standards should institutions be held accountable to the public? And what sort of institutional feedback mechanisms would engender a greater sense of responsiveness on the part of the public? The final session examined the need for a greater public voice in political affairs. What sort of public process would give citizens a stronger voice? What can be learned from those processes that already exist? Can they be replicated on a wider scale? And what role do civic leaders play in forging ties between the public and elected representatives – can they serve as a "missing link"?

Charles F. Kettering once observed that "a problem well-stated is a problem half-solved." While it is clear that reversing the decline of civic engagement in America will take a sustained nationwide effort – and a good deal of time, the way the Roundtable participants neatly summed up the challenges before us suggests that the civic renewal movement has already taken some significant steps in the right direction.

"THE CRUST OF PUBLIC MISTRUST":
AFTER-DINNER REMARKS BY DANIEL YANKELOVICH

In an after-dinner presentation, Daniel Yankelovich, cofounder and chairman of Public Agenda, offered some illuminating reflections on the disconnect between the public and government. The most serious problem facing democracy today, he observed, is that the public has become isolated from the political process. This alienation can be attributed, at least in part, to a pervasive myth in our political culture, one that reaches up to the highest tiers of our leadership and is reinforced again and again in our public discourse. This myth holds that the public interest is nothing more than the sum of all special interests, that the interests of the few, when aggregated, equal the interests of the many.

This marketplace logic has set its mark on the way politics is practiced in our country. All too often, it is reduced to a game of numbers aimed at pleasing more than half the people more than half the time. The trouble is, of course, that interest groups do not represent an individual's full range of interests. By attending to a myriad of special interests, our leaders systematically neglect the general interest. As a result, "many, if not most, Americans feel excluded from the political process. They feel as if they are denied a voice in most public policy debates."

According to Yankelovich, this problem is exacerbated by the fact that our government leaders, news organizations, and experts adhere to a dysfunctional understanding of public engagement. The dominant view holds that a well-informed public is the highest expression of democracy. It puts a premium on disseminating information, creating awareness, and educating the public. This approach works fine when there are no hard choices to make. But, in most cases, political decisions are made on the basis of values and convictions – ideas about what is right and wrong – not information.

This "expert information" model, as Yankelovich called it, is based on several misconceptions. It falsely assumes that 1) information is the key to public learning; 2) people make up their minds once they receive relevant information; 3) the public interprets information in the same way that experts do; 4) experts know what information the public needs and how to convey it; 5) experts who debate their opposing views help the public to learn; 6) technology can compensate for defi-

ciencies in the model; and 7) that there is no need to base the model on how people actually make hard choices.

Yankelovich contrasted the "expert information" model with what he called the "public learning" approach in which public judgment deepens and enriches expert opinion. Unlike the traditional model, this conception accounts for the fact that people have to struggle with competing values and confront painful tradeoffs over a period of days or months or even years before they reach an informed and mature opinion on an issue.

Yankelovich described public learning as a journey that moves through three distinct phases. In the first – the opinion-formation or conscious-ness-raising phase – people become aware of an issue. If it is important to them, they develop a sense of urgency and look to leadership to take action. This process tends to be largely media-driven. As they move into the second stage, they begin to struggle with differ-ent policy options and test them against their basic values. Through interaction with others, they engage the issue from different viewpoints and gradually aban-don impractical or unrealistic thinking. This involves a process of dialogue in which people come to understand other points of view and use that understanding to broaden their own. This process of "working through" an issue is driven less by information than by feelings, values, and moral convictions. In the final stage, the public comes to judg-ment and a resolution is reached.

The most serious problem facing democracy today, is that the public has become isolated from the political process.

– Dan Yankelovich

According to Yankelovich, our society has institutional mechanisms in place that correspond to the first and third stages of this learning process, but not the second. "In the stage of formulating choices and working them through," he said, "there are no systematic institutions."

There are a handful of exceptions, he added, citing the National Issues Forums, James Fishkin's deliberative opinion polls, and his own "choicework dialogues," but a much greater effort is needed to institu-tionalize public learning and make it an integral part of the political process.

Striking an optimistic note, Yankelovich observed that the widespread anger and mistrust many Americans feel about the political system is not as profound as is generally presumed. He referred to their disaffection as a "crust," one that can be easily penetrated. But, unfortunately, most efforts to restore public confidence fail because "they are efforts to give the public a greater voice without taking account of what you need the voice for." What is required, he insisted, is a thoughtful public voice – the sort that emerges from struggling with the issues – not just raw, shooting-from-the-hip public opinion.

"There is such a hunger for community, for talking to one another, for overcoming the isolation, for having a voice in the decisions that affect your life," Yankelovich concluded. "If you engage people to the tiniest bit, then that crust of mistrust is broken through and you can begin to create social capital and the sort of involvement of ordinary Americans that is necessary for this system to work."

PARTICIPANTS